

Lawrence Grossman

THE CULTURE WARS AND AMERICAN JEWS

Are Jews combatants in the American culture wars? Yes, but in a highly idiosyncratic way. To understand their role we must first delineate the battle lines of the struggle.

The term “culture wars” entered the American lexicon in 1992 with the publication of James Davison Hunter’s book by that name,¹ although the phenomenon he described began in earnest in the late 1970s and its roots go back at least a decade earlier. Hunter argued that instead of contesting with *each other* on historical or theological grounds – as had been the case in the past – Catholic, Protestant and Jewish America were now each *internally* divided about whether, and to what extent, traditional moral values should guide public life. Hunter cited evidence that on this question followers of these religions were increasingly finding that they had more in common with likeminded members of other faiths than with people in their religious community who took the opposite position on the appropriate role of moral values in the civic arena.

On the one side are liberals, adherents of all three religions who tend to view moral choices as private matters and seek to maximize individual freedom by allowing people to decide them for themselves. At the level of public policy, they feel that traditional norms inherited from the past should yield to secular considerations of the present. In their view, allowing religiously-mandated doctrine to affect public policy could trample the rights of those belonging to minority faiths or to no faith. To be sure, proponents of this position are not necessarily consistent, as they often

¹ J. Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, New York 1992.

welcome faith-based support for liberal views they espouse, such as the religious argument for racial equality.

On the other side are those from the traditionalist wings of these same religions who bemoan what the late Father Richard John Neuhaus called “The Naked Public Square.”² They argue that a secularized society that prioritizes individual autonomy and rules out traditionalist religious voices invites moral relativism and may even threaten the individual rights of those guided by traditional values, as they claim is happening in the current push to require Catholic-sponsored hospitals to provide abortions.

The Nature of the Conflict

While the culture wars play out on a host of specific issues, these can be subsumed under three broad categories.

One has to do with religion in public venues. The most important of these are the public schools. In fact the first shots in what would become a full-fledged culture war may very well have been fired in 1962, when the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Engel v. Vitale*, invalidated prayer – even of the nondenominational variety – in public schools. Ever since, there has been ongoing dispute and intermittent litigation over the teaching of religion and the celebration of religious holidays in the classroom, and the use of tax money to provide benefits for nonpublic religiously-sponsored schools. Another hot-button issue is curricular. Should science classes that teach the theory of evolution also present the alternative creationist view, backed by some traditionalists, that explains the world as the product of a Creator? Should history and civics classes stress the unique greatness of the American way of life, in line with the way traditionalists tend to look at their country’s history, or point out its mistreatment of women, blacks and other minorities? Does classroom subjection to theories that undermine his or her family’s deeply-held beliefs violate a child’s rights?

Another public-space issue is the placement of religious symbols in parks and government buildings, or on streets. Here as well, the courts have generally decided against those eager to recognize God in the public square, and this, in turn, has induced proponents of such displays to fall back on the argument that Christmas trees (as opposed to mangers), Easter bunnies and Hanukkah menorahs are actually secular in nature, and therefore permitted in public places.

A second area of contention is the potential conflict between individual choice and the religion-based idea of sanctity of life. The hot-button issue is abortion. For most liberals, termination of pregnancy is a decision best left to the option of the pregnant woman. However the official Catholic position equates abortion – irrespective of the reason – with murder, and a great many traditionalist Protestants and Orthodox

² R. J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, Grand Rapids MI 1984.

Jews would allow it under only highly restricted circumstances. This conflict also reflects differing views of the rights of women. Proponents of the right to abortion see it as a feminist cause and criticize opponents as hostile to the interests of women. As in the case of public-school prayer, the Supreme Court has intervened on the liberal side, but efforts to restrict abortion rights and ultimately end them continue.

Another “life” issue is the conflict over “pulling the plug,” terminating the treatment of critically ill patients where there is no chance for recovery. Here too, the autonomous choice of the family to end treatment comes up against the traditional taboo, codified by the monotheistic religions, against ending life.

The third cluster of issues concern sexuality, again pitting individual self-fulfillment against traditional group norms. Some duel over the availability of pornography on the street corner or the internet, and others over whether the government should be funding birth control – here, too, pitting pro-feminist liberals against traditionalists – but the truly explosive debate today concerns homosexuality. The monotheistic religions have traditionally condemned same-sex relations, and so self-evident did the ban appear that American state laws enforced it. But over the last few decades those upholding the heterosexual standard have been put on the defensive: homosexual activity was first decriminalized and then given social cachet, and now several states have legalized gay marriage on the grounds that people ought to be allowed to marry whom they please, irrespective of older, religion-based norms.

It is surely noteworthy that every one of these battles in the culture wars arrays proponents of individual choice against norms associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition, a tradition originating in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. The assumption that religious values must underpin all aspects of life; the conviction that God purposefully created the world; the notion that all life is sacred since God is its source; and the privileging of heterosexual marriage as the norm for society all originated as Jewish ideas, and were carried on by Christianity. Yet paradoxically, contemporary American Jewish opinion, unlike the situation among Christians, veers overwhelmingly to the liberal side of the culture wars.

Where the Jews Are

Studies conducted over the years comparing the views of Jewish and non-Jewish Americans have repeatedly confirmed the Jews’ anomalous position in the culture wars.

The 1981 National Survey of American Jews, conducted by Steven M. Cohen, found that 72% of American Jews favored enactment of the Equal Rights Amendment, which would have enshrined equality of men and women in the Constitution. In contrast, two national polls on this question yielded 45% and 52% in favor. Asked whether homosexuals ought to be allowed to teach in the public schools, 67% of the Jewish sample answered in the affirmative as compared to just 45% in a national Gal-

lup poll. Half of the Jews polled agreed to government funding for abortions, a position that only 40% took in two national surveys. Not surprisingly, 65% of the Jews said they were Democrats, the more liberal party, generally unfriendly to allowing religion a role in public decision-making. In contrast, 45% of the general American public identified as Democrats.³

Things were no different two decades later. A survey sponsored by the Center for Jewish Community Studies in 2000, also conducted by Steven M. Cohen, asked a national sample of Jews an even more extensive battery of questions and compared the results to national polls. While 65% of the general public would allow display of the Ten Commandments in public schools, only 38% of the Jews agreed, and even allowing a moment of silence each day for students wishing to pray, approved by 84 percent of the public, received support from just 48% of Jews. Similar gaps between Jews and non-Jews were evident on every question dealing with the role of religion in the schools.⁴

The same paradigm held for views on the appropriateness of religious expression in public life. Asked if “organized religion should stay out of politics,” 56% of the general public and a whopping 88% of Jews agreed. Among the general public, an overwhelming 70% were “pleased when political leaders publicly affirm their belief in God.” Only 30% of the Jewish sample was pleased – a harbinger of the displeasure many Jews would feel that summer when the Democratic vice-presidential candidate, Senator Joseph I. Lieberman, spoke openly about his Jewish faith. And while the general sample, by almost identical majorities, felt it “okay” for municipal authorities to put up manger scenes and Hanukkah candles on public property during the winter holiday season (80% for the former, 79% for the latter), just 43% of Jews approved of the mangers and 46% the candles. The extraordinarily paradoxical fact was that Christians were far more in favor of the public display of Jewish religious symbols than Jews themselves.⁵

Jewish and non-Jewish culture-war differences were seen on abortion and sexuality as well. On the former, the gap had widened considerably since 1981. On the abortion question, 88% of Jews and 58% of the general public said that “abortion should be generally available to those who want it.” And while 42% of Americans considered it appropriate for the Right to Life movement to use religion in its opposition to abortion, only 15% of Jews thought so. Forty-eight percent of all American opposed same sex relations as compared to 23% of Jews who did; 52% of Jews, but just 32% of Americans, favored homosexual marriage.⁶

Not surprisingly, the Jewish preference for individual choice and distrust of religion in public life once again surfaced in response to questions about political views. While only 31% of the American public identified itself with the Democrats,

³ S. M. Cohen, *American Modernity and Jewish Identity*, New York 1983, p. 140.

⁴ *Idem*, *Attitudes of American Jews in Comparative Perspective*, Philadelphia 2000, p. 19.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 23

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 26, 28.

fully 59% of Jews did. In a way, this gap actually understates the Jewish preference for the Democrats. In a separate polling of a sample of Jewish communal leaders – people who spoke for and presumably represented American Jewry to the broader American public – 81% were Democrats.⁷

At December 2011 survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute suggests the same, if not a greater, Jewish–non-Jewish divide, even though the differently-worded questions rule out direct comparison with the 2000 study. Fifty-three percent of all Americans believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases, far less than the 93% of Jews who think so. The percentage of Jews favoring legalization of same-sex marriage outstrips the non-Jewish figure by 81% to 48% (51% of the Jews “strongly” favor it). In response to a question, not asked in 2000, about their opinion of various non-Jewish groups, Jews gave a “favorability rating” (on a 100-point scale) of 47 for Mormons, 41.4 for Muslims, and just 20.9 for the Christian Right, a group primarily associated with promoting religious values in American public life. That the generally pro-Israel Christian Right is viewed so much more unfavorably than Muslims in a post-9/11 world demonstrates that American Jewish opposition to Christian influence on the domestic scene would seem to dwarf its concerns about the Middle East conflict.⁸

And again, Jews are overwhelmingly found in the Democratic political camp. In September 2012 – even as the Israeli prime minister berated the American administration for failing to set forth “red lines” defining at what point it will use force against the Iranian nuclear project, and soon after the Democratic national convention had to embarrassedly insert a missing plank in its platform affirming that Jerusalem is Israel’s capital – Gallup reported that President Obama held a 70%–25% lead over Mitt Romney, his Republican challenger, among Jewish voters.⁹

Judaism Liberalism, Religious or Secular

Why American Jews should be so much more averse to allowing religion a place in public life than Catholics or Protestants has generated a considerable amount of scholarship.

Many Jewish liberals consider it axiomatic that the Jewish tradition motivates their attitudes. Political scientist Lawrence Fuchs, who first analyzed this mindset, argued that most Jews consider the Hebrew Bible’s prophetic teachings of humanitarianism and compassion – as in the much-cited command “Love Your Neighbor As Yourself” – the basis for an ethic stressing social justice and support for individual self-fulfillment; Jewish respect for learning and intellect as promoting unfettered freedom of thought and expression; and Judaism’s alleged this-worldly, non-ascetic

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

⁸ R. P. Jones, D. Cox, *Chosen For What? Jewish Values in 2012*, Washington DC 2012, pp. 39, 19.

⁹ www.jpost.com/USPresidentialrace/Article.aspx?id=285336.

appreciation of physical pleasure as buttressing the case for noninterference with peoples' sexual predilections.¹⁰

Whether or not this is an accurate picture of the Jewish tradition, a good number of Jews have a deep need to believe it to be what Judaism demands. Beautifully exemplifying this need is Kenneth Wald's story of a congregant who asked his rabbi about the Jewish position on abortion. "The rabbi tried hard to provide an answer that captured the subtlety and ambiguity of Jewish thinking on this perplexing topic," finally concluding that abortion was "morally permissible under certain circumstances." The congregant "breathed an audible sigh of relief, saying how happy he was to learn that Judaism supported his pro-choice position on abortion."¹¹

But, as Charles Liebman has pointed out, "Jewish religious values are not unambiguously liberal; they are folk oriented rather than universalistic, ethnocentric rather than cosmopolitan, and at least one major strand in the Jewish tradition expresses indifference, fear, and even hostility toward the non-Jew."¹² The neighbor to be loved as oneself was a fellow Jew; Jewish respect for intellectuality was, until modern times, geared toward knowledge of Jewish sacred texts, not academia; and sexuality, according to the classical Jewish codes, was to be channeled exclusively into heterosexual marriage. Similarly, traditional Judaism's respect for authority, reverence for tradition, and unwillingness to sacrifice group identity through assimilation into the wider society fit well with an outlook that favors the expression of religious points of view in the public debate, even though comparatively few American Jews in fact espouse this course. Forty years ago Liebman identified an important element of the minority that did, Orthodox Jews, noting that they, the Jews most strongly committed to the precepts of the faith, "are less liberal than non-Orthodox,"¹³ a situation that continues today and will be discussed below.

To be sure, sophisticated American Jewish liberals are well aware that the sources of Judaism contain much that contradicts the liberal political and social ethos that predominates in the Jewish community today. They concede that by interpreting Judaism to fit contemporary sensibilities they are announcing, in the words of Leonard Fein, that "we, the living Jews of this generation, *are* the text." Fein explains, "I take what I need from the tradition, and what I like, and what I can use, the parts that make substantive sense and the parts that have stylistic appeal."¹⁴ But there is

¹⁰ L. H. Fuchs, *Sources for Jewish Internationalism and Liberalism*, [in:] *The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group*, ed. M. Sklare, Glencoe IL 1958, pp. 596–613. This is excerpted from Fuchs's book, *The Political Behavior of American Jews*, Glencoe IL 1956.

¹¹ K. D. Wald, *The Probable Persistence of American Jewish Liberalism*, [in:] *Religion as a Public Good: Jews and other Americans on Religion in the Public Square*, ed. A. Mittleman, Lanham MD 2003, p. 65.

¹² Ch. S. Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew: Politics, Religion, and Family in American Jewish Life*, Philadelphia 1973, p. 140.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 143.

¹⁴ L. Fein, *Where Are We? The Inner Life of America's Jews*, New York 1988, pp. 32, 41. The most recent treatment of the Biblical evidence (M. Walzer's, *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, New Haven 2012), concludes that it presents no coherent political viewpoint.

good reason to believe that the overwhelming Jewish preference for sharply limiting the role of faith-based values in the public square has less to do with religious beliefs than with their lack. American Jews may be disproportionately liberal because they are far less religious, both in terms of belief and of action, than Christians.

The Pew Forum U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, conducted in 2008, compared the various American religious denominations on a host of theological, behavioral, social and cultural issues.¹⁵ It found that while 90% of Protestant Evangelicals, 73% of Mainline Protestants, and 72 percent of Catholics were absolutely certain of the existence of God, only 41% of Jews were. American Buddhists, adherents of a non-theistic religion, were the only group scoring lower, at 39%. Ten percent of the Jews said they did not believe in God, a position that no more than 1% of the Catholics or any group of Protestants took. Asked about the importance of religion in their life, just 31% of Jews thought it “very important,” an answer given by 79% of Evangelicals, 52% of Mainliners, and 56% of Catholics. Sixteen percent of Jews said they attended religious services at least once a week, as compared to 58% of Evangelicals, 34% of Mainline Protestants and 42% of Catholics. And the 26% of Jews claiming to pray daily was by far the lowest of any group, trailing even the Buddhists.

The same anomalous position of Jews in the American religious spectrum shows up in the responses to Pew’s questions about religious beliefs. While 37% of Jews believed that Scripture was the word of God – either literally or in some other sense – 80% of Evangelicals, 62% of Catholics and 60% of Mainline Protestants thought so. Only 5% of the Jews viewed their own religion as the one true faith, tied with Buddhists and Hindus for last place.

The low scores of Jews on measures of religion undoubtedly reflect the fact that unlike Christianity, Jewish identity is not just a matter of religion, but implies ethnic and cultural content as well as, or even instead of, religion. While a Catholic atheist, for example, may be a contradiction in terms, Jewish atheists exist in abundant numbers. Also, low Jewish religiosity in such surveys may be partially due to the growing phenomenon of young adult and middle-age Jews who identify with Judaism but reserve the right to live out that identification in highly individual, even idiosyncratic terms. Their expression of Jewishness may not necessarily conform to the standard categories of religious belief and behavior that an earlier generation recognized, or that present-day social scientists would recognize, as Jewish.¹⁶

The Historical Dimension

An alternative to the religious explanation of the Jewish proclivity toward the liberal/secularist side of the culture wars is the history of the Jewish people. Centuries of li-

¹⁵ www.religions.pewforum.org/comparisons.

¹⁶ S. M. Cohen, A. M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America*, Bloomington IN 2000.

ving as an often persecuted minority under Christian governments, in which religion and state were intimately bound together (a similar situation confronted Jews living under Muslim rule) left the Jews of Europe with a collective aversion to religion exercising power and influence in the public square. The emergence of the modern Western nation-state, where religion's public wings are clipped, ultimately brought with it Jewish emancipation, as previous restrictions on Jews' religious, economic, occupational and residential freedom were gradually lifted.

But these gains did not come without struggle. Almost invariably, the dominant Christian religious establishment sought to use its remaining public influence to block Jewish equality, while the anticlerical elements in the various countries advocated Jewish rights as part of their broader liberal, secularist agenda. Thus the French Revolution, which destroyed the Bourbon monarchy and the power of the established church allied with it, emancipated the Jews. A similar, if less dramatic and bloody, pattern was evident elsewhere in Europe, seemingly teaching Jews the lesson that they, the small minority, were best off when religion is kept out of public life.

This explains the unique place that the United States holds in Jewish history. From the nation's beginnings, there was no established national religion, and Jews were on a plane of legal equality with Christians. As newly-elected President George Washington wrote to the Jewish congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, in 1790, this was not mere toleration, "as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights." Rather, in the United States everyone alike enjoyed "liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship."¹⁷

While certainly welcome, this novel situation of no national religious establishment did not ease Jews' insecurity about their status in America. Christianity was still the religion of the vast majority, and popular culture was not free of denigration of Judaism and outright anti-Semitism. Jews, ever on the alert for signs of religious encroachment into public life, have viewed any attempt to inject religion – it would, of necessity, be the majority Christian religion – into governmental decision-making as a clear and present danger to Jewish interests and a violation of the Jewish American dream.

Furthermore, Jews tended to support the rights of other minorities and their struggles for equality, on the grounds that depriving one group of rights threatened the rights of all. Most American Jews, then, have felt they were acting not only on the basis of Jewish values, but also in their own self-interest by supporting organizations and voting for political candidates committed to civil rights, civil liberties, broad free-speech protections, sexual freedom, and a strict interpretation of Church-State separation. It is no accident that a good number of the court cases that gave rise to legal precedents in these areas were litigated by Jewish organizations.¹⁸

¹⁷ www.gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents/hebrew/reply.html.

¹⁸ G. Ivers, *To Build a Wall: American Jews and the Separation of Church and State*, Charlottesville VA 1995; S. Svonkin, *Jews Against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties*, New York 1997.

Jews on the Defensive

The culture wars, strictly speaking, began with the emergence of a Christian Right, a traditionalist backlash against the gradual removal of religious values from public life that had been happening, with the blessings and often the political advocacy of Jews, since the 1960s.

This came as an unwelcome shock to the mainstream Jewish community, whose organizations naturally mobilized to protect what they saw as under threat, which was, in the words of the American Jewish Congress, "support for the separation of Church and State and the protection of the public school classroom; support for the Equal Rights Amendment [barring discrimination against women] and the right of women to choose to have an abortion; support for human rights and opposition to all oppressive governments; support for the right to dissent and opposition to censorship; support for compassionate social welfare legislation... the classic agenda of democracy."¹⁹ The National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, whose annual *Joint Program Plan* reflected the consensus of organized American Jewry, put front and center the need to oppose restoration of prayer and other religious practices in the public schools, enactment of tuition tax credits for private schools, and all other measures that threatened the Jewish community's insistence on keeping religion a private matter.²⁰

Jews felt an added degree of alarm over the new political role of Evangelical Protestants. Jewish groups were long used to the Catholic Church's opposition to birth control, abortion, and homosexuality, and its attempts to secure government support for parochial schools. But the newly aroused Evangelicals, whose militancy in opposition to the naked public square appeared to far outstrip the Catholics, was something else entirely.

The mainstream Jewish organizations, all liberal in orientation, had historically found natural allies in the Mainline Protestant denominations, as represented by the National Council of Churches, in their opposition to assaults on separation of Church and State that came mainly from the Catholics. But Jews had little awareness that there was another, quite substantial variant of Protestant Christianity that looked askance at strict separation, and this took them by surprise. Adding to the alarm was the substantial size of the Evangelical population and its potential political clout. Estimates ranged from 30 million adults, total church membership in the major Evangelical denominations, to as high as 130 million, if people formally outside these bodies but sympathetic to the Evangelical message were included. The Gallup organization, in 1981, estimated that 35 million potential voters could be classified as Evangelicals, roughly 20% of the electorate.²¹

¹⁹ *Where We Stand: The Evangelical Right*, "Congress Monthly", January 1982, p. 8.

²⁰ National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, *Joint Program Plan 1982-83*, pp. 50-54; 1983-84, pp. 59-64; 1984-85, pp. 31-35; 1985-86, pp. 7-15; 1986-87, pp. 38-40; 1987-88, pp. 39-42. This body changed its name to the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) in 1999.

²¹ K. D. Wald, *Religion and Politics in the United States*, New York 1987, pp. 199-200.

One could hardly blame the Jews for not expecting this Evangelical surge. For one thing, Evangelicals had more or less quit the national political arena in the 1930s, after the embarrassment of their involvement with the Ku Klux Klan and opposition to the teaching of Darwinian evolution, and the failure of prohibition. Their return to the debate over religion in public life surprised most observers.²² Also, since Jews tended to live in cities and on the East Coast, and the Evangelical center of gravity was in rural and small-town America, the two groups rarely interacted.²³ A corollary of this geographic and social distancing was the growth of stereotypes: just as Evangelicals might assume that all Jews were conniving bankers and businessmen (and Christ-killers to boot), so too did Jews tend to think that Evangelicals were uneducated country bumpkins, hardly worthy of serious engagement on issues of public policy.²⁴

Another reason for Jews to place themselves on the other side of the barricade from Evangelicals in the culture wars was fear of the latter's conversionary intentions and denigration of Judaism. The involvement of Evangelical leaders in the "Key 73" project, designed "to call the continent to Christ," was still fresh in the memory of Jews when the culture wars erupted. In 1980 there was the remark of Rev. Bailey Smith, that "God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew." Nine years later, 15 American Evangelical theologians issued a statement that "failure to preach the gospel to the Jewish people would be a form of anti-Semitism, depriving this particular community of its right to hear the gospel." In 1996, the Southern Baptist Convention, by a large majority, resolved to "direct our energies and resources toward the proclamation of the gospel to the Jews," and six years later its coordinator for Jewish ministries said that the Catholic "exemption" of Jews from proselytization was "withholding the hope of Israel." Even though many of these flare-ups, and others like them, were followed by apologies and acts of reconciliation, the impression that Evangelicals were intent on converting them was widespread in the Jewish community.²⁵

Despite their fear of Evangelical designs on the separation of Church and State, and whatever their suspicions about designs of conversion, Jews had to tread carefully in fighting the culture wars. Evangelical churches, entering an era of expansion, were enhancing their influence in American life at the expense of the mainline denominations. And the fact was that the Evangelicals, though at loggerheads with

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 182–186.

²³ L. Grossman, *Jews – Middle Atlantic and Beyond*, [in:] *Religion and Public Life in the Middle Atlantic Region: The Fount of Diversity*, ed. R. Balmer, M. Silk, Lanham MD 2006, pp. 95–98; J. Hudnut-Beumler, *Protestants in the Middle Atlantic Region*, *ibidem*, p. 48.

²⁴ Consider G. Mamo's protest: "We're not all Elmer Gantry holy rollers. We're not all Southerners. We don't all drive pickup trucks. We're not all poorly educated rednecks. And most of us have never owned a white suit." G. Mamo, *Luckier than Moses: the Future of Jewish-Evangelical Relations*, [in:] *Uneasy Allies: Evangelicals and Jewish Relations*, eds. B. Johnson, Nancy Isserman, A. Mittleman, Lanham MD 2007, p. 77.

²⁵ L. Grossman, *The Organized Jewish Community and Evangelical America*, [in:] *Uneasy Allies...*, pp. 54–60.

the Jewish community in the culture wars, were at the same time its greatest allies in support of the State of Israel. After the Six-Day War of 1967, when American Jews complained of “the relative silence of the Christian world in the face of the threat of the imminent destruction of the two-and-a-half million Jews in Israel,” they noticed that Evangelicals were an exception.²⁶ Ever since, Evangelicals have remained the American Christian group most supportive of Israel, and have contributed many millions of dollars to it.²⁷

Jews are not quite sure why Evangelicals are so pro-Israel – is it a sincere concern for the welfare of a democratic state that shares basic American values, a literal reading of Biblical passages that grant the Promised Land to God’s original chosen people, a Christian eschatological scheme for setting off the war of Gog and Magog and hastening the Second Coming, a conversionary ploy? Whatever the rationale, Jews and Evangelicals were so at odds on domestic issues that the Jewish community could reach no consensus on whether it was wise to ally with these pro-Israel Christians on a common agenda in support of the Jewish state.

The government of Israel itself, removed as it is from the American culture wars, has had no qualms about welcoming Evangelical backing and even encouraging its expression in the American political arena. This was evident as early as 1980, when Evangelical support played a major role in the election of Ronald Reagan as president. Israel’s prime minister at the time, Menachem Begin, conferred the coveted Jabotinsky Centennial Medal on the strongly pro-Israel Jerry Falwell, head of the powerful Moral Majority organization, for “distinguished service to the State of Israel and the Jewish people.”²⁸ The current prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, maneuvering against Barack Obama—a president who both opposes the agenda of the Religious Right and is cooler toward Israel than Reagan—has gone over the president’s head and appealed directly to Congress and the American people, with special attention to the large Evangelical community.²⁹

Today, the prevalent mood within the organized American Jewish community is to encourage the continuing Evangelical commitment to Israel’s security while downplaying areas of continuing disagreement.³⁰

Countervailing Voices: Neoconservatism

While American Jews have arrayed themselves overwhelmingly on one side of the culture wars, in opposition to a public role for religious values, a minority dissents from this consensus.

²⁶ National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, *Joint Program Plan 1967–68*, p. 7.

²⁷ G. R. McDermott, *Evangelicals and Israel*, [in:] *Uneasy Allies...*, pp. 127–154.

²⁸ L. Grossman, *The Organized Jewish Community and Evangelical America...*, p. 55.

²⁹ Idem, *Jewish Communal Affairs*, [in:] *American Jewish Year Book 2012*, eds. A. Dashefsky, I. Sheskin, Westport CT 2012, pp. 115–116.

³⁰ C. Schrag, *American Jews and Evangelical Christians: Anatomy of a Changing Relationship*, [in:] *Uneasy Allies...*, pp. 167–177.

Small in numbers but influential in American intellectual life, Jewish neoconservatives have argued not only that a pervasively secular public square weakens America, but that it could also endanger Jewish group survival. Neoconservatism began in the mid-1960s, when erstwhile liberals began questioning the effectiveness of large-scale government programs to aid the poor. By the end of that decade, as urban racial unrest and protests against the Vietnam War spilled over into campus disruptions, anti-American rhetoric and acts of violence, they found themselves on the other side of the barricade, strongly defending traditional values and American patriotism. The American Left's coolness toward the State of Israel in the aftermath of the Six-Day War of 1967 also provoked neoconservative ire. The subsequent rise of the counterculture, with its attack on the traditional family, approval of drug use, and frequent demonization of established American institutions, reinforced the neoconservative determination to fight back.³¹

Many of the leading neoconservatives – Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, Norman Podhoretz, Midge Decter, Allan Bloom, Martin Peretz – were Jewish. Furthermore, under the editorial direction of Podhoretz, *Commentary*, the editorially independent monthly sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, became neoconservatism's leading journalistic voice.³²

Irving Kristol, the acknowledged godfather of the movement, most clearly stated its diagnosis of American Jewish life. "Dedication to secular humanism," he wrote, "is so congenial to American Jews because it has assured them of an unparalleled degree of comfort and security." It provided "individual Jews a civic equality and equality of opportunity undreamed of by previous Jewish generations." But low birth rates encouraged by adoption of an upper-middle-class lifestyle and rising rates of intermarriage produced by the breakdown of older religious boundaries threatened the survival of the Jewish community. Kristol called on American Jews to reconsider their universalism, conquer their "suspicion and fear of Christianity," support a larger role for religion in public life, and "reestablish a Jewish core, a religious core, as a key to its identity."³³ Kristol's argument was fleshed out by Elliott Abrams, a younger neoconservative who served as assistant secretary of state in the Reagan administration. In the increasingly religious America that he saw emerging, Abrams urged Jews to recognize that Jewish survival depended on their seeing themselves as part of a religion, not just as members of an ethnic or cultural grouping, even if they lacked personal religious faith. Such a change of focus would entail a new willingness to cooperate with the Christian Right.³⁴

³¹ M. Friedman, *The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy*, New York 2005, pp. 116–204.

³² B. Balint, *Running Commentary: The Contentious Magazine that Transformed the Jewish Left into the Neoconservative Right*, New York 2010, pp. 97–177.

³³ I. Kristol, *The Future of American Jewry*, "Commentary", August 1991, pp. 21–26; idem, *Why Religion Is Good for the Jews*, "Commentary", August 1994, pp. 19–21.

³⁴ E. Abrams, *Faith Or Fear: How Jews Can Survive in a Christian America*, New York 1997.

At its height, neoconservatism powerfully influenced the Republican Party, its staunch anti-communism providing the intellectual ballast for policies credited with helping topple the soviet system. But the disastrous invasion of Iraq during the George W. Bush administration, widely attributed to neoconservative influence, the economic collapse of 2008, and the subsequent recapture of the presidency by the Democrats weakened neoconservatism on the American scene and hurt its credibility – never great to begin with – in the predominantly liberal Jewish community.

Countervailing Voices: The Orthodox

Potential new recruits to the side in the culture wars favoring increased public recognition of religion could be found in Jewish Orthodoxy, a sector of the community that was rising steadily in power and self-confidence.

Constituting, according to the most recent national surveys, no more than 10% of affiliated American Jews, the Orthodox were the most tradition-bound and least secularized element of the community, and hence most in tune with the priorities of the Catholic traditionalists and Protestant Evangelicals on the appropriate place of religion in society, the sanctity of life, and the priority of religion-based group values over individual autonomy. For years, this Orthodox minority studiously avoided expressing its voice in public debate. To an extent, this reticence reflected the same fear that motivated the Jewish mainstream: that more religion in public life meant, in the American context, more Christianity, and that was not good for Jews. But there was another inhibiting factor peculiar to the Orthodox. As the weakest and least Americanized Jews, the Orthodox were reluctant to assert themselves. They tended either to defer to the Jewish mainstream, or to seek cultural isolation and “take care of themselves.”³⁵

This began to change, at least for some sectors of Orthodoxy, in the 1960s. The first Orthodox defections from adherence to the naked public square came when the Church-State barrier came up against the financial needs of Jewish schools. First, Agudath Israel of America, an Orthodox body heavily committed to the creation and maintenance of Jewish day schools, began cooperating with Catholic groups in seeking federal funding for non-public schools. Then the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (sometimes called the Orthodox Union, or OU), the largest Orthodox synagogue body, defied the Jewish communal consensus by supporting the “child-benefit” provision of the Elementary and Secondary School Act of 1965, which indirectly provided government aid for private and religious education. Ever since, Orthodox groups have shown little reluctance in seeking ways to secure public help for their educational institutions.³⁶

³⁵ S. C. Heilman, *Haredim and the Public Square*, [in:] *Jewish Polity and American Civil Society: Communal Agencies and Religious Movements in the American Public Square*, eds. A. Mitelman, J. D. Sarna, R. Licht, Lanham MD 2002, p. 333.

³⁶ L. Grossman, *Mainstream Orthodoxy and the American Public Square...*, pp. 293–298.

The OU also began speaking out against what it saw as threats to morality in the public sphere. In the 1960s it denounced what it viewed as declining standards of decency in the media, the ostensible growth of “permissiveness,” especially on the college campus, and the Equal Rights Amendment. When the abortion debate heated up, the OU declared that “an unborn fetus has the right to life,” and opposed government payments for abortion. And when gay rights entered the public arena in the 1970s, the Orthodox group characterized homosexuality as a “perversion” that no Jewish agency should condone. In 1974, the OU noted the sea change that had occurred in its approach to public policy: “Differences of opinion on public issues between the Orthodox community and others are no longer limited to Church-State affairs... Torah thinking, combined with greater communal and organizational strength, has moved the Orthodox Union to adopt different positions on some social issues.”³⁷

The Orthodox community today is far friendlier to the public recognition of faith-based values than mainstream Jewish organizations, but constraining the full political expression of this preference is Orthodoxy’s heavy reliance on government social programs. A disproportionate share of American Jews living in poverty is Orthodox, a problem that is especially severe among the most insular elements, many of whom do not receive sufficient secular education to pursue careers that could afford them a living. As the Democratic Party generally supports these programs but frowns on religion in the public square, many Orthodox Jews find themselves in the uncomfortable position of voting for the party they rely on for material survival even though it stands counter to their culture-war preference for faith-based morality in public life.

A special election for Congress in 2011, however, suggested that more Orthodox Jews might be considering voting their values over their pocketbooks. The congressional district involved, encompassing portions of the New York City boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, was overwhelmingly Democratic, had a large Jewish population, and its previous representative was a liberal Democratic Jew. To fill this ostensibly “safe” Democratic seat, the party chose David Weprin, another liberal Democrat and an Orthodox Jew. The campaign of his Republican opponent, Bob Turner, went after the votes of Jewish Democrats by criticizing Democratic President Obama’s alleged unfriendliness to Israel.

It also specifically targeted the Orthodox vote with ads, signed by prominent Orthodox rabbis, ripping into Weprin for his enthusiastic support, while serving in the State Assembly, for gay marriage. Even though Orthodox residents of the district risked losing governmentally-funded social programs by electing a Republican, enough of them did vote for Turner to give him victory by a comfortable 6-point margin.³⁸ It remains to be seen whether or not such values-based political behavior becomes more common among Orthodox Jews.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 301–304.

³⁸ T. Kaplan, *G.O.P. Gains House Seat Vacated by Weiner*, “New York Times”, September 13, 2011, p. 1.

What is undeniable is that the Orthodox are becoming more numerous, and hence potentially more influential in shaping the community's priorities. A survey of the Jews in the New York City area, conducted in 2011, indicated that the percentage of Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Jews – the core constituency for Jewish liberalism – had declined drastically over the previous decade, from 48% to 39%.

In contrast, the Orthodox share rose from 27% to 32%, constituting nearly half a million people. And the disparity appeared likely to widen over time, since an astounding 64% of Jewish children were being raised Orthodox, “about twice as many Jewish children who live in conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist households combined.”³⁹ The reasons for the Orthodox renaissance were clear: unlike many other Jews, the Orthodox had an intermarriage rate of virtually zero and comparatively high fertility. They also had near-universal intensive Jewish education and socialization, factors that naturally inculcated the traditional values that liberal Jews wanted kept out of the public square.

Since New York City Jews constituted about a quarter of American Jewry, this demographic trend could portend a major national shift in Jewish positioning in the culture wars. Orthodox Jews, largely antagonistic to the secular bent of the Jewish mainstream organizations, had the potential, over time, to become a new Jewish mainstream, and align with Christian traditionalists in the battle over the public role of religious values. Of course there is no reason to assume that present trends will continue. In this case there is no way to know if the Orthodox, and especially their children, will be able, over time, to withstand the cultural forces that so powerfully transmit the messages of individualism, secularism and universalism.

Then again, there is no guarantee that Evangelical support for civic recognition of religious values will retain its intensity either. Indeed, there are signs of its possible erosion among some younger Evangelicals.⁴⁰ It may soon become anachronistic to speak of the culture wars as we have known them over the past generation. What configuration of opinions replaces it about the relationship of religious faith to public life is anyone's guess.

Żydzi amerykańscy wobec wojny kulturowej

Autor podejmuje problem stanowiska amerykańskich Żydów w konflikcie kulturowym. Środowiska żydowskie w Stanach Zjednoczonych, traktujące Amerykę jako historyczną szansę stworzenia liberalnego ustroju równych praw – w historii Europy tradycyjnie im odmawianych – zostały postawione wobec dylematu samookreślenia się wobec ewolucji liberalnej. W efekcie nastąpił ich podział z powodu zauważenia obecności w ewolucji liberalizmu pewnych zjawisk antywołnościowych i antyamerykańskich. Artykuł jest podsumowaniem dyskusji na ten temat.

³⁹ S. M. Cohen, J. B. Ukeles, R. Miller, *Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011, Comprehensive Report*, New York 2012, pp. 122–123.

⁴⁰ J. Farrell, *The Young and the Restless: The Liberalization of Young Evangelicals*, “Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion”, September 2011, pp. 517–532, and the website www.evangelicaliberal.wordpress.com.